Facing the Global Capitalist Hegemony: Women Workers in Bangkok
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Abstract
The Asian economic boom of 1985–1997 brought new wealth to the Thai economy. The U.S., Japan, and other wealthy countries poured money into Thai manufacturing companies. Women and men migrated from rural Thailand to fill these industrial jobs that then fueled the world’s global capitalist expansion. But when the boom collapsed in 1997, it was obvious that Thailand’s working class had not only been left out of the short term prosperity, but would also suffer the most in the face of the economic downturn. Women laborers bore the brunt of the blow because they were the first to be laid off; they were also employed in the hard-hit lowest tier of the workforce. Many women were forced to go back to their rural homes or stay in the city and take up less-respected forms of work such as prostitution: 1 in 60 women in Thailand works as a prostitute.

With the collapse of the boom, Thailand undertook a move towards localism. That is to say, rather than bolstering their presence as a global “tiger,” the government made a move to strengthen local and regional economies, which would in turn fuel the national economy and national exports. In spite of this new localist focus that emphasizes a bottom-up approach, I argue that labor and social policy has not realized enough change in terms of women in the workforce. Although Thai women are commonly thought to be better off than women in neighboring countries, they still face lower pay than men, unreliable employment arrangements, refusals to grant maternity leave, and unstable urban existences. Many working women are therefore not able to reach “personhood” on the same scale as men.